

Appropriations Committee
Public Hearing on the Governor's Proposed Deficit Mitigation Plan
Thursday, March 11, 2010

Good afternoon, Senator Toni Harp, Representative John Geragosian and members of the Committee. My name is Grace Damio and I am a senior manager and program director at the Hispanic Health Council which is based in Hartford and does work throughout the state.

I have been before you a number of times in the past when difficult financial times have presented the possibility of cuts to programs that are essential to the well being of significant sectors of the state's population, and cost saving to the state as well. This time the magnitude of the budget crisis is greater than it has been in times past. You have to make very difficult decisions. I hesitate to come before you to simply request that you not cut the programs that I know are so important. What is the alternative?

I think that it is important to keep in mind a number of basic principles:

1. Does the program bring federal money into the state?

Two of the programs that I am here to discuss bring significant federal money into the state. Healthy Start brings 50 cents on the dollar of Medicaid match for a significant number of the state dollars allocated to it.

HSI, or Human Services Infrastructure is a coordinated system of services that helps people access the services they need to gain or maintain self-sufficiency. This state-funded program provides dollar for dollar match for the state's federally funded SNAP Outreach Program. This program brings approximately a million federal dollars into the state that go directly into local economies starting with the purchase of food.

Cuts to Healthy Start and HSI will result in further reductions in funds available to the state's economy, and represent further economic hardship in the state.

2. Will the cuts result in loss of jobs in the state?

Maybe not to state workers, but certainly to entire networks of front-line staff providing vitally needed services to the state's most vulnerable populations. Healthy Start is based in 15 locations throughout the state, HSI in the CAP agencies, and the counterpart staff of the three agencies that partner to provide SNAP Outreach services – Hispanic Health Council, End Hunger

Connecticut and the Connecticut Association for Human Services. Nurturing Families Programs in community based organizations and all of the state's birthing hospitals.

3. Do the programs save the state money due to their preventive impact on the populations they serve?

Even in such dire economic times, it is important to keep looking down the road. Healthy Start has been evaluated and found to be effective and cost effective. The program helps to prevent preterm and low birth weight births, and saves the state, between two million and 5.4 million dollars each year in the immediate medical costs spent on low birth weight babies. This does not even take into account the exponentially higher costs of medical, developmental and social services needed throughout the lifetimes of many of these low birth weight babies.

Nurturing Families utilizes an evidence-based prevention model that promotes positive parenting and strong families – the cost-saving benefits of this vital work have been well documented.

HSI provides the state match for the SNAP Outreach Program. SNAP, or Food Stamps, is the nation's most important food security program. Food Security is key to obesity reduction, healthy development of children, and of all things, prevention of low birth weight...

4. Given that programs like the ones that I have highlighted lay the foundation for healthy babies, children and communities, play vital roles in protecting the health and well-being of the state's most vulnerable populations, and in many cases literally save lives, have we done all that is possible to avoid cutting them?

This is where the really difficult decisions come in. Have we done all that is possible? It seems that if in better economic times, those that have more in our wealthy state have benefit from tax cuts, which have resulted in less revenue available to the state, this is the time to decide that we can't afford right now to lack this revenue. I strongly encourage you to take leadership in considering revenue raising as one of the important solutions to the critical financial crisis that the state is facing. I encourage you to protect the funding of the Healthy Start, Nurturing Families and Human Services Infrastructure Programs.